

## Abstract

This paper deals with three performance pieces by the Bosnian artist Maja Bajevic, entitled *Women at Work* (1999–2001). The artist performed these works in public spaces, in collaboration with Muslim women who were war refugees from Srebrenica. The first piece *Women at Work—Under Construction* took place in Sarajevo (1999), the second subtitled *The Observers* was performed in a French castle (2000), and the last in the series, *Women at Work—Washing Up* was situated in women’s public bath in Istanbul (2001). All three performances were delicately interlaced with Bajevic’s inimitable politics of domesticity. In her

solo pieces and those realized in cooperation with other women, her politics manifest through the public performance of diverse manual activities, such as embroidering, sewing or laundering. These habitual female proceedings, repetitive and monotonous, are carried out in public spaces so as to lay bare women’s traditional activities for coping with absences. The theme of absence is at the core of Maja Bajevic’s art. Most of her works relate to subjective “voids,” distances, digressions, separations and the plausibility of loss; they refer to absent “spaces,” the spaces that may have existed or have been imagined as homes or homelands.

**Keywords:** memory, loss, rites de passage, *Trauerarbeit*, performance, politics of domesticity, war in ex-Yugoslavia, massacre in Srebrenica, war refugees

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# Maja Bajevic: The Matrix of Memory

*Memory, which concerns us, even if it is not ours, but is, how to say it, beside ours, and which determines us almost as much as our history.*

*Georges Perec, Je suis né*

In an interview given during the *Manifesta 3* exhibition, where her video *Women at Work—Under Construction* (1999) was shown, Maja Bajevic stated that she was taking on “*une manière spécifiquement féminine . . . de reconstruire un espace perdu*” [a specifically feminine manner . . . for reconstructing a lost space] (Dreyfus 2000). In this joint performance, as in the two to follow, *The Observers* (2000) and *Washing Up* (2001), Bajevic delicately interlaces her inimitable politics of domesticity. In her solo pieces and those realized in cooperation with other women, such politics is made manifest through the public performance of diverse manual activities, such as embroidering, sewing or laundering. These habitual female proceedings, repetitive and monotonous, are carried out in public spaces so as to lay bare women’s traditional activities for coping with absences. The theme of absence, I believe, is at the core of Maja Bajevic’s art. Most of her works relate to subjective “voids,” distances, digressions, separations and the plausibility of loss; they refer to absent “spaces,” the spaces that may have existed

as actual homes or homelands or have been imagined as “opaque thresholds” (Pepe Espaliú). To deal with absences—in art or life—requires the recollection of formerly existing and now absent presences; the matrix of memory, inescapably, commences to pulse.

Given that *Women at Work* entails cooperative works in which the artist also takes part, it would be wrong to assume that Bajevic deals here with her own memory alone. The performances where the women share a common manual work are thus pieces during which the participants’ memories are—in all probability—triggered as well. Furthermore, as they are war refugees, they have particularly strong memories of the Bosnian war, in particular Srebrenica, the atrocities of which they, unlike the artist, personally experienced. Rejecting the widely accepted conviction that “time heals all wounds,” Kaja Silverman argues the opposite. In one of her film analyses, she asserts that with time, the hurt of separation loses its actual limits and becomes a “disembodied wound.” If we presume that in *Women at Work*, memories, or rather wounds, are shared, the artist must have found herself in the position described by Silverman:

*If to remember is to provide the disembodied “wound” with a psychic residence, then to remember other people’s*

*memories is to be wounded by their wounds. More precisely, it is to let their struggles, their passions, their pasts, resonate within one's own past and present, and destabilize them. Since the new mnemonic matrix which weaves itself around the borrowed memory inevitably shifts the meaning of that memory, it is also to enter into a profoundly dialectical relation to the other, whose past one does not relive precisely as he or she lived it, but in a way which is informed by one's "own" recollection. (Silverman 1996: 189)*

Performance, chosen by Bajevic as the most appropriate medium for coping (however partially and temporarily) with their shared wounds, and for relating to the given Bosnian present and its war-torn past, indicates a truly utopian intention that, in the main, characterizes "event arts" since their inception after the First World War. Back in the 1920s, artistic enactment and engagement were, in Stephen C. Foster's reading, perceived as potentially effective means of providing *transition points* between the past, present and future:

*The event served the artists as an instrument for achieving, in reality or by illusion, a positioning of themselves and their audience in a hostile and self-destructive world and as a potential instrument of change ... The "artistic event" made a live, active response to live "social events," and served as an alternative to the*

*presentation of ideas through a conventional art and literature that had clearly been rendered impotent by the abuses of a dysfunctional and failing society. (Foster 1988: 3)*

In passing, it is interesting to note that after the war was over, most of Sarajevo's artists, women in particular, have chosen performance held in public spaces for referring to Bosnian "dysfunctional" post-war society.

Aside from this aspect of *Women at Work*, I find an additional element of similar importance. All these performances are conceived as ritualistic events: the first was staged in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the later two in France and Turkey. Ritualism has been one of the most common and significant strategies of post-Second World War performance art, which stands, in a way, in opposition to an increasing fragmentation of contemporary society (for example, see Kaye 1989: 32–45 for discussion of performances by Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and Ulay). The ubiquity of ritualistic works in women's art of the 1970s, which relied on repetition and simultaneity, has been recognized as gender-specific, as the women artists have shown an "interest in the *communal* nature of ritual activity. The assumption is that in ritual activity we escape the fragmentation and contingency of the modern condition and enter into a kind of quasi-religious, timeless wholeness" (Sayre 1989: 184). Accordingly, *Women at Work*, where Bajevic invited only women (and non-artists) to take part, should probably be

seen in the context of artworks seeking to "repair" not modern but indeed post-modern and post-Communist conditions, instigated by the pre-modern and destructive aspirations of the Serbian regime in the late 1980s. Above all, these post-Yugoslav conditions have been dominated by nationalism and war.

Regardless of the part of the globe in which it occurs, nationalism has, as Cynthia Enloe (1989: 44) argues, "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope." As is widely known, the most "functional" debasement of the "other side" in the Bosnian war was, in the cause of ethnic cleansing, carried out in the form of the rapes that "our brave guys" enacted against "your women" in order to humiliate "your men." (After returning home from the Bosnian front, some Serbian soldiers stated to the local press that the "best" things in the war were "shooting and fucking.") Unlike fallen heroes, however, the victims of rape, as earlier in history, became perceived not as "fallen heroines," but more often than not as "fallen women," and rarely as citizens whose individual and human rights had been eradicated. In a double turn, a violated woman, as nationalist rhetoric would have it, represents the raped nation. Ann McClintock's critique is very much to the point:

*All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous ... Nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize people's access to*

*the resources of the nation-state ... No nation in the world grants women and men the same rights and resources in the nation state ... Not only are the needs of the nation here identified with the frustrations and aspirations of men, but the representation of male national power depends on the prior construction of gender difference. All too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to define symbolically the limits of national difference and power between men.*  
(McClintock 1996: 261)

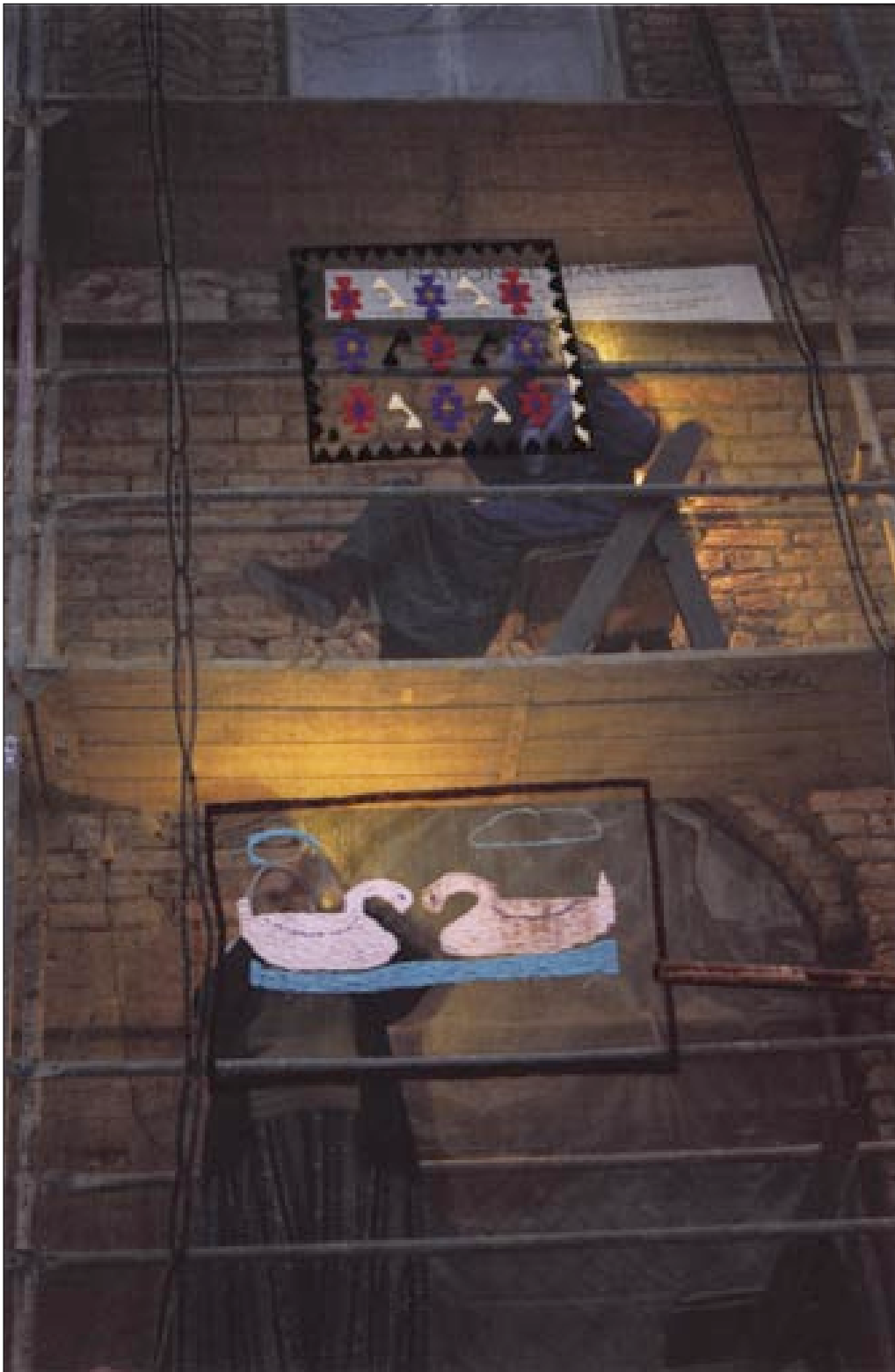
In her politicizing of the domestic, Bajevic is well aware that with her public performances she enters a sphere that is highly gendered: not only in post-war Bosnia, but in all other post-Socialist (nation) states, the political/public sphere is practiced as a *menspace*.

The family of performances called *Women at Work* is staged in those public spaces one usually passes by or goes through. As these works ultimately deal with the absence of home, the artist intentionally avoids the semi-public venues considered “home” to the arts, and stages the performances accordingly, in freely available spaces that are far from able to induce any sense of homeliness. The politics of domesticity also implies the practice of *emplacement*: the presence of women who execute domestic work lasting many hours or days transforms these *non-spaces*—a façade, a castle, a bathhouse—into ritual places in

which an interface of (the artist’s) individual and borrowed memory could occur. These venues are sites for *temporary* existences, for crafting needlework or laundering *as if* home and home members were there. These places are to be inhabited by the *liminal personae*, by those who are *passeurs*, the people-in-passage.

### **The Façade**

In his seminal anthropological study, *The Rites of Passage* (1908), Arnold van Gennep examined life crises or liminal states (*limen*, signifying “threshold” in Latin) and rituals that “accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (Turner 1969: 80). Victor W. Turner later remarked: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969: 81). Each rite of passage moves through three phases: separation, liminality and reincorporation into the *communitas*. In the transitional period, an individual is neither in nor out of society, he or she is in a liminal state; from this state the ritual subject should emerge transformed. Although all performances belonging to *Women at Work* refer to transitional conditions, albeit in a slightly different way, *Under Construction* (1999) can be clearly read as a rite of passage. This performance takes place in Sarajevo some four years after the peace was won. For her project, Maja Bajevic, a Bosnian but a non-Muslim, invited five Muslim women—Fazila Efendic, Zlatija Efendic, Amira Tihic, Hatidza



**Figure 1**

*Women at Work—Under Construction*. Five-day performance/video, 11 hours 48 minutes, 1999. Production: SCCA Sarajevo, Maja Bajevic. Photo: Haris Memija, Marijana Curic. Courtesy of Peter Kilchmann gallery Zurich, galerie Michel Rein, Paris.





Verlasevic and Munira Mandzic, from the region around Srebrenica (now part of Republika Srpska) living as refugees in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>1</sup>

In *Under Construction*, Maja Bajevic interweaves two crucial facets of the rite of passage. Firstly, there is the personal experience of the subjects-in-transition, in a situation once described by Stephen Greenblatt:

*In a rite of passage, something is extinguished, something becomes extinct: if not you yourself, in your bodily being, then something you are, a status or position in which you have been fixed, from which you have drawn your identity, to which you referred your experience in order to give them some coherence or meaning. And then, either through choice or through something over which you have no control, the status crumbles, the position disappears, the identity is no longer your own. (Greenblatt 1995: 28)*

This *inner* experience, however, remains invisible to outside observers.

*Under Construction* is an artistic event wherein different aspects of women's social invisibility are layered. Here, women's chosen work is accomplished in public and, in addition, such a "superfluous" and apparently purposeless activity as decorating the façade is contrasted with purposeful male physical labor, namely, the male workers' role of restoring the "essence" of the building, soon to serve again its

meaningful, public function as the national museum for visual arts (the Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina). In this performance, though, more crucial than exposing the invisible domestic craft to public view, and laying bare the gendered constellation of manual labor, is, I trust, something else. This is an upsetting issue, swept under the carpet in all post-Yugoslav states, Bosnia included: the war refugees. At this point, Bajevic introduces yet another focal feature of a rite of passage, and this is the social impact such an event has in a community:

*A rite of passage is something that happens to an individual—and as such, is a particularly intense experience—but it is at the same time social and in most cases institutional. A private rite of passage is like an unattended wedding: it can mime the form of the ritual, but misses the mark. The significance of the transition derives from collective understandings that accumulate around the preformed acts ... And the emotions too are collective, in that they follow certain paths laid down by those who have gone before and those who actually or in imagination are the spectators of the ritual actions. (Greenblatt 1995: 28)*

The (artistic) ritual on the façade takes place in Sarajevo many years after the implementation of peace guaranteed by the Dayton Peace Agreement signed in December 1995. In exhibiting her own and her partners' ritual crafting on the façade to the casual observers



in the Sarajevo streets, the artist simultaneously exposes the painful social issue: she points to the communal position of her co-workers, whose citizen status as war refugees is exposed to collective amnesia. This occurs not only in Bosnian and Herzegovina but in all other post-Yugoslav states as well. The *Under Construction* performance publicly unveils the condition of women-refugees who are pushed to the margins of social visibility in the community, which, as the argument goes, has (to have) more urgent needs, such as the actual reconstruction of the country devastated by an imposed war. Bajevic deconstructs these alleged societal priorities and touches upon a less burning problem: the collective invisibility of refugees, in this case women exiles from Srebrenica, produced in a post-war country.

During the Bosnian war, the anonymity of women refugees, regardless of their ethnic group, was steadily reinforced by the mass media, foreign television stations in particular. The refugees were televised as an unidentified mass, as a crowd or a suffering *Volk*. The women were seldom interviewed, and as a rule, were reduced to ethnicity or nation, subsumed under essentialist terms such as “Bosnian women,” or rather, “Muslim refugees.” Women’s identities, their names being mentioned, for instance, was far less frequent. In the same vein, none of the reviews written about *Women at Work* after it was shown at *Manifesta 3* and the *Seventh Istanbul Biennial*, respectively, reveal the names of the participants:

they remained anonymous. They are always referred to as either “women exiles” or “refugees from Srebrenica.” In all these cases, the women consistently represent their *Volk* or the religious group to which they belong, deprived of their individualities and their visibility as subjects and citizens.

Bajevic’s co-performers are women whose condition is liminal in numerous ways. Moreover, they have been enduring this state for many years. They used to live in small towns and villages in the region of Srebrenica and in their earlier lives they were either employed or performed the invisible domestic work as housewives and mothers. Since 1995, however, when they were forced to abandon their homes, they (have to) lead a “city life,” while residing in Sarajevo’s suburbs, in homes left by the people who are living in exile somewhere else. Each of these women lost a male family member who most probably died in the Srebrenica massacre. The family and therefore the social status of these women in the Bosnian state could not, however, be clearly defined. Their men are not officially declared dead but rather “missing.”<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, in order to support their life without their men and homes, the Bosnian government grants them the status of widows, and provides them with a certain minimal income as if their husbands or fathers were actually buried. In the absence of the deceased bodies, however, Bajevic’s companions have been deprived of the possibility of performing their individual

mourning, usually consisting of several phases. In many cultures, including the Muslim one, the display or at least the presence of the dead body (in this case wrapped in a special cloth) is one way of honoring it; this marks the beginning of the mourning ceremonies which are concluded by the body’s entombment, itself a rite of passage with both individual and communal meaning. Regularly visiting the graveyard and paying tribute to the departed has a soothing function for those left behind, but it is also an act with public visibility. This is, in passing, a gendered aspect of mourning, as it is primarily carried out by the female family members.

Fazila Elendic, Zlatija Elendic, Amira Tihic, Hatidza Ferlasevic and Mundira Mandzic could never perform these customary sorrowful but comforting duties. The loss of their normal existence as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters was never accompanied by a ceremony to enable them to survive this life crisis and move on to a new state of existence. Their grief remains socially invisible except for the white headscarves most of them wear, following the practices of Muslim culture in which white is the color of mourning. By inviting these women to work with her on the façade, Maja Bajevic makes their invisible mourning socially perceptible and provides it with a due dignity. This performance, then, could be recognized as a labor of mourning, performed within the institutionalized framework of art. This may be supported by the fact that performers, or rather the *liminal personae* who appeared on

the façade did not sing together, as women habitually do when they embroider together at home in peacetime. Over hours and days, their chosen work was enacted in silence. A rite of passage that occurred here “as art” was a ceremony that did not (or rather could not) take place in life. Perhaps, *Under Construction* could be best described in Benjamin’s terms as a *Trauerspiel*.

### The Castle

*The Observers* (2000) takes place in a castle, and it elaborates further the condition of *passeurs*, the women-in-passage. Invited to be the guest in an artist-in-residence program in France where she was expected to make a solo performance, Maja Bajevic invited her own guests, Fazila Elendic, Zlatija Elendic and Hatidza Verlasevic, who had previously participated in the Sarajevo performance, and Nirha Elendic. The materialized image that preceded their ephemeral life in the palace, is the group portrait entitled *The Observers*, presented as a life-size color studio photograph, showing the artist and four women with whom she created an artistic refuge in the castle. The photograph pays homage to a Dutch original, namely, Frans Hals’ painting *Regentesses of the Old Men’s Almshouse* (c. 1664), serving as an “initial image” for many reasons. Most of all, Bajevic provides here the apparent reference to the Dutch involvement in Srebrenica, suggested in the work’s title.<sup>3</sup>

Bajevic’s reference to Hals’ *Regentesses of the Old Men’s Almshouse* cites a painting that

implicitly deals with the absence of home and with transience, as the almshouse was the final dwelling for impoverished and homeless residents of Haarlem. Besides this, the Dutch masterpiece is precious not only because female group portraits are historically infrequent, but also because this painting represents a grouping of women who have a profession. In passing, however, when compared with Hals’ group portrait of men from Haarlem, *Regents of the Old Men’s Almshouse* (c. 1664), where he had male sitters whose names are known to history, the women’s portrait reveals the opposite “destiny”—the regentesses were left to posterity as professional but, alas, nameless women.

Like any work of art, the portrait *The Observers*, does not, in Derridean terms, tell the truth, but it does not lie either. This picture in which the women are *not* at work, does not tell the truth about “real life,” namely, it does not “say” that the four women portrayed together with the artist are in fact war refugees. As this portrait was made before the performance in France, it does not say anything about the women’s short-lived reality in the castle either, which is recorded in a video also called *The Observers*. Along with the video, snapshots were taken during the stay in the castle, but unlike *The Observers* portrait and video, these images do not have the status of *Art*. Rather, like any photograph, they are simply souvenirs proving, as Barthes phrased it, that something “has been there” (*ça-y-a-été*). In Bajevic’s group portrait and the original painting by Frans Hals, the women sitters are placed in

the interior, whereas in “life” the four refugee women and the artist embroidered together *en plein air*. As though in a fairytales, they were enjoying their sojourn performing their dainty needlecraft in the castle’s park. This evanescent feminine idyll was “observed” by yet another guest from Sarajevo, Alma Suljevic, an artist whose art practice focuses on another damaging aspect of Bosnian post-war reality, namely, the harmful presence of the minefields. She is here just a visitor to the profession of figurative painter, but, nevertheless, she tries her best to represent the ephemeral castle scene in the “solid” and “everlasting” medium of oil painting, with the intention to transport this fleeting reality into “eternity.” Essentially, this situation involves persons who are all estranged from their real circumstances, who are in a number of ways only *passeuses*.

The needlework that plays different roles in all three versions of *Women at Work*, indicates that Maja Bajevic deliberately associates women with textiles, alluding to an invented tradition in which, as Janis Jefferies ironically contends, these “leisurely pastimes evoke ‘feminine’ sensibilities within the patriarchal order. They contrive to silence the wounds inflicted by history as faded markings on sheets” (Jefferies 1995: 165). The textile work which many women artists turned to in the 1980s, whereby Penelope with her “unraveling of history” became the feminists’ heroine, has induced an entire “Arachne’s genre” (Sarat Maharaj) in the visual arts (in Ovid, Arachne

is a human maiden, a weaver, who challenges the skill of the divine weaver, Minerva. In contrast to the goddess whose tapestries presented twelve heavenly gods on majestic thrones, Arachne weaved the scenes with gods punishing humans for hubris by steadily violating, or more precisely raping, human females. Minerva punished Arachne’s arrogance by turning her into a spider). Discussing the “subversive stitch” that women artists have relatively recently started to strategically employ, Jefferies holds that in the public mind, at least in the West, traditional women’s handicrafts, such as spinning, weaving and embroidery, are described under the one generic term, *textiles*:

*This term commonly seems to signify certain ideas, values and traditions within communities identified with domesticity, women’s creativity and shared endeavour. Textile work is perceived as labor-intensive, slow and painstaking and yet, in a double twist, rendered and devaluated as invisible women’s work, non-work or non-productive labor. (Jefferies 1995: 164–5)*

Importantly, Bajevic’s politics of domesticity implies that the women’s effort in all three *Women at Work* performances is paid: the participants always receive a modest, say, “artistic,” fee for the manual labor they perform.

Even though the embroidered cloths in *Women at Work* are more the by-products of performances rather than their goal, these handicrafts could be (as the cut-

outs of the façade’s netting in Sarajevo were) sold. Whether we consider them to be fabrics with an aura of *Art* or not, these “spin-off textiles” imply a deconstructivist and feminist stance that Bajevic shares with those artists who produced solely textile-based artworks. The vital features of all these “Arachnologies” is summarized by Jefferies who argues that despite the fact that cloth is “inscribed within a range of humanist and universalist discourses as a container for full human expression; rites of passage, ‘primitive’ and ‘natural’ activities,” textiles as finished artifacts, however,

*would appear on the one hand to guarantee a range of protective, comforting and homely values, whilst in their “raw” state these scraps and fragments of cloth become synonymous with residues of “Women’s Time.” At one and the same moment these pieces can rhythmically pattern and reassemble touch and texture, offer intricate and indigenous design to interrupt the masculine model. (Jefferies 1995: 165)*

The souvenir photographs witnessing “real life” by the castle, testify as well that the women’s embroidery is reduced to an interlacing of small, message-less and “meaningless” ornamental patterns onto a neutral cloth, later to be used for decorating someone’s home furniture or perhaps for making the refugees’ own new homes look homely. This is not needlework with

political messages of the kind the traditional “epic tapestry” used to carry, crafted in those times when tapestries, “being a portable art form that could be taken into battle and from chateau to chateau . . . played the role that television does now as a signifier of power” (Newdigate 1995: 176). The textiles to be used in the following performance, *Washing Up*, will deal with such “epic” issues.

In keeping with Frans Hals, Maja Bajevic dressed her castle guests and herself in the period fashion. The photographic portrait, *The Observers*, again, does not tell the truth about the cultural turn that occurred in “life.” Only video and documentary shots of the castle scenes, and the emerging oil portrait painted by Alma Suljevic, “tell” that, except for the artist, all her companions wear headscarves that undeniably indicate their Muslim background. This is a culturally specific sign, as Muslim convention demands that women must have covered heads whenever they leave their private sphere. This sign is evident in *Under Construction* as well as in the later performance, *Washing Up*. It is true that due to nationalism(s), war and post-Communist “re-invention” of religion, the Muslim Bosnian society also underwent considerable Islamization. This process should not, however, be glibly equated with Islamic fundamentalism outside Europe, for the Bosnian situation is specific and it deserves to be observed in the context of a state that was and is (to remain) a multi-ethnic formation.

In Socialist Yugoslavia, on the other hand, any public expression

alleging religion, regardless of whether it was Catholic, Christian-Orthodox or Muslim, was considered the residue of the “old,” bourgeois regime of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918–1941). The “new” Socialist comrades born out of the Revolution (1941–1945) were expected to take a “progressive” stance. Thus, in 1947, at the First Congress of the Anti-Fascist Front of Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina, some Muslim delegates relinquished their veils in public, and most of them appeared only with covered head. By 1951, the wearing of veils became sanctioned as the Socialist government passed the law in Serbia (Kosovo) and soon in Bosnia, which abrogated any wearing of veil and special headscarf. (“*feredza*” and “*zar*”). As many Yugoslav women with Muslim upbringings have testified privately, going into the street without a veil back in the 1950s was tantamount to appearing naked in public. The wearing of headscarves by “post-Socialist” women who during the recent Bosnian war started to appear in public with their hair covered (although hardly ever in chador or with veiled faces) does indicate the new cultural-cum-ideological swing in post-war Bosnia in that it implies the social visibility of *one* culture within the multicultural setting. In her anthropological research made during the early 1980s in Turkey, a country that, much earlier than Socialist Yugoslavia, experienced a radical secularization, Carol Delaney, touches upon the “fetishism of hair in Islam” and provides

valuable insights on the covering of women's hair:

*The issue is a significant one primarily for those women who wish to make a self-conscious statement about their religious sentiments and commitments. Whether urban women express their reasons for covering as emancipation from the male gaze, as devotion to Islam, or, more politically, as resistance to the West—the sexual, religious, and political meanings cannot be separated. (Delaney 1995: 67)*

I do not intend to insist that the women from Srebrenica who participated in *Women at Work* wore their headscarves in order to display their ideological views, although this should not be fully excluded either. These women come from villages, as also indicated by their clothing (the pantaloons are scarcely to be seen in Bosnian cities). The headscarf is common in the rural areas all around the Balkan Peninsula regardless of whether women observe Muslim, Catholic or Christian-Orthodox mores, and it is mainly worn by widows and those in mourning. In contrast to the Sarajevo piece where the refugees wear scarves in a more “working” manner, the same participants in the castle have their headscarves draped in a socially prescribed mode, demonstrating here, with a certain solemn self-consciousness, their Muslim “selves.” The sojourn in the castle thus becomes a peculiar interface of many cultures—the Calvinist garments and postures captured in

the original painting by Frans Hals, the Muslim outlook, with a French Baroque palace in the rear. None of them is dominant nor is totally erased; they simply cohabit in the same cultural space.

### The Bathhouse

*Washing Up* (2001) is set out in a commercial, single-sex, communal space, the Cemberlitas Hamam in Istanbul. Unlike the two earlier productions of *Women at Work*, this piece could be attended only by women and, moreover, it presumed the active participation of spectators who could access the art event after passing through a cleansing rite of bathing. The viewers, here transformed into users, were guided to the performance room by the recorded voices of adults reciting a children's game in Turkish, English and the artist's mother tongue. Over five consecutive days (during the opening of the *Seventh International Istanbul Biennial*) Maja Bajevic, Fazila Elendic and Zlatija Elendic performed two hours a day, laundering of white cloths with several “epic” texts that they had previously embroidered in Sarajevo.

The politics of emplacement consists here of using the Turkish bath, a *topos* that in past centuries has been imagined and imaged in Western painting as the “essence” of Oriental—and women's—“otherness;” more often than not it was just a “pretext” for displaying the female nude in the process of bathing. Discretely referring to the Western tradition of Orientalism, Bajevic may have chosen this venue also because the women's bathhouse in many

cultures stands for the household and home. In these communal places, women may achieve a kind of “applied spirituality” and through the washing of the body and the children, traditionally the laundry as well, they could conduct secularized access to purity:

*The women's baths, then, are a site where the rites of female purity are enacted as the physical manifestation of other forms of purity (spiritual, sexual, psychological). The household is reconstituted within this arena of symbolic celibacy, using the vehicle of the female body and including the period of obligatory inert leisure before returning to the outside world. Bathing is secular worship, wherein pleasure is linked to duty and ritual . . . (Condee 1996: 20)*

Bearing in mind that *Washing Up* takes place in an Istanbul bathhouse and that it also involves two Muslim female participants identified by their pantaloons and headscarves, this performance also subtly alludes to the ablutions (the ritual cleansing of the hands and body) that all Muslim men are obliged to perform before their recurrent daily prayers. The choice of the hamam does not only suggest the prime role of water in the Islamic context, since the revivifying function of water is immanent to religious symbolism existing as it exists in different cultures. As Eliade wrote:

*In water everything is “dissolved,” every “form” is broken up, everything that*

*has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water, not an outline, not a “sign,” not an event. . . Breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regeneration, of giving new birth. . . Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores—even if only for a moment—the integrity of the dawn of things. (Eliade 1958: 194)*

Besides its other qualities, *Washing Up* is one of the rare artworks produced in the countries that once formed the federal state of Socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991) that implicitly deals with the Communist, or rather Titoist, heritage. The art historian Dejan Sretenovic, proffers an important comment that goes beyond the immediate context of the Belgrade art he is examining:

*Whereas communism in the countries of Eastern Europe, as observed by Baudrillard, disimmunized itself and fell into its own emptiness spontaneously and unexpectedly, “as a result of its own inertia,” nobody knows what actually happened with communism in former Yugoslavia, since there was no radical ideological mobilization in the country and it plunged into political and ethnic conflicts, resulting in its bloody disintegration . . . there was no ideological vacuum or necessary distance so that Titoist ideology could*

*become the subject-matter of an impartial deconstructivist activity. (Sretenovic 1996)*

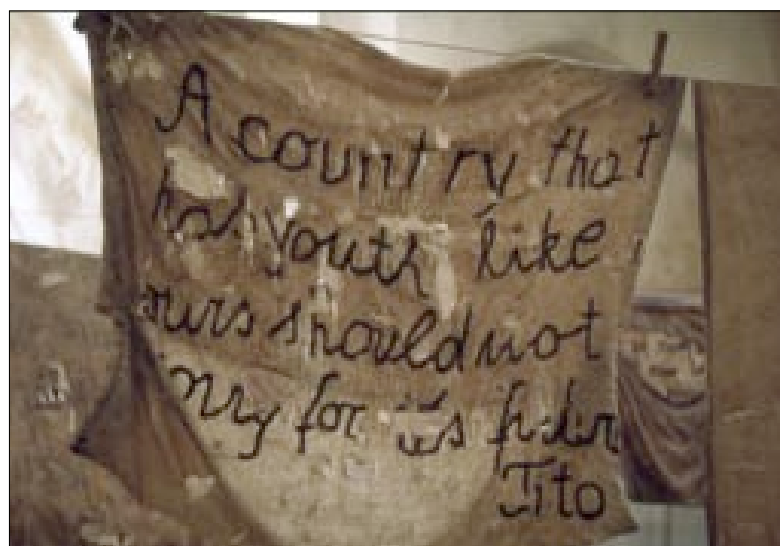
Only after the actual and bellicose destruction of former Yugoslavia was finally over, did the artistic deconstruction, still seldom, start to take place.

Maja Bajevic’s way of undoing the ideologically charged past is to situate the political in the domestic, “female” realm. Contrary to the decorative motives embroidered on the façade’s netting, and the needlework with geometrical patterns crafted during the residence in the castle, the cloths being washed in the bathhouse carry phrases with ideological meaning. These “epic” messages are particularly familiar to those who lived in the now vanished country—“Titoist” Yugoslavia. These political slogans used to be written on banners displayed during national holidays or congresses of the Yugoslav Communist League. They are now embroidered on towel-like textiles akin to the kitchen cloths with cheerful (but wise) advice to housewives that women used to use for decorating their “kingdom.” But the statements applied to the laundered textiles are less jolly and more war-like. The first, “Long live the armed brotherhood and unity of our nations,” was the slogan built into the fundamentals of the “new” Yugoslavia born out of the Peoples’ Revolution and a “just” Liberation War; the second refers to the readiness of all Yugoslav peoples/nations (and not solely the professional military forces) to defend their independence and freedom against attack by a



**Figure 2**

*Women at Work—Washing Up*. Five-day performance/video, 15 hours 14minutes, 2001. Production: Istanbul Biennial, Maja Bajevic. Photo: Emanuel Licha. Courtesy of Peter Kilchmann gallery Zurich, galerie Michel Rein, Paris.







(potential) foreign enemy: “We should live as if there will be peace for a hundred years, but we prepare ourselves as if there will be war tomorrow”; and finally the last statement, often printed in the history manuals used in schools, addresses future generations, those who were to enjoy peacetime in a “hundred years” to come: “The country that has youth like ours, should not be worried for its future.” The author of these sentences quoted by Bajevic is in fact Josip Broz Tito (b. 1892), the one and only President of Socialist Yugoslavia and the “engineer” of what is today called the Yugoslav multi-cultural “experiment”. When Tito, locally known as the “son of all Yugoslav nations” died in May 1980, Bülent Ecevit (a Prime Minister of Turkey) confidently wrote in the condolence book: “He is one of the rare leaders who left without fear of what would happen after him” (cited in Matic 1996). Eleven years later, Tito’s Yugoslavia, a country in which Bajevic and her co-launders (as well as myself) were born, legally ceased to exist, soon to end up in war wreckage.

In unmasking the previous Communist militarism, which over decades painstakingly exploited its anti-fascist commitment in the Second World War, Bajevic also demystifies the bellicose nationalisms that emerged as one of the basic ideological remedies to repair the wounds of the previous ideological construction. For both the project of (Yugoslav) Socialism—regardless of the fact that it guaranteed social equality between male and female citizens—and that of re-invented

nationalisms exploited, although in different ways, the blueprints of patriarchy. Hence, Bajevic here radically inverts a strong egalitarian optimism cherished in the early stages of Socialist Yugoslavia, when, back in 1958, Tito issued the resolute statement: “The belief that domestic work is only for women is backward and it has nothing to do with the role of woman in a Socialist society” (Josip Broz Tito cited in Tomsic 1980: 357). Real life, on the other hand, proved the opposite.

This ritual laundering may only to a certain extent be read as the labor of mourning over the “lost space” locally called *Yuga* (i.e. Yugoslavia), performed here as a self-distractive action that wipes out the cloths previously embroidered by the launderers themselves, mimicking the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, annihilated by its own, previously “brotherly-oriented” (and brotherly armed) citizens. *Washing Up* may also appear as an artwork whereby “historical” or in Kristeva’s words, “masculine” time is countered with “women’s time” allied to cycles, gestation and recurrence (Kristeva 1979: 191), suggested here via “feminine” proceedings presented in a cyclic manner (five days, two hours a day) and by the very location of women’s bathhouse. Despite this, it would be rather simplistic to argue that women here just “wash away” men’s wars, as some (feminist) reviewers of this performance were quick to assume.

*Washing Up* is a new rite of passage where, it seems, the liminal subjects now try to “remake” the world and, hopefully, their place in it—once

more within the institution of art. The water used for washing up the embroidered fabric is, however, not clean: prior to washing, it was made dirty by the launderers themselves and during the course of performance it remained unchanged. Is this, then, a cleansing ritual? Discussing various concepts of pollution and taboo, ritual uncleanness and its links to the sacred, Mary Douglas asserts that in many cultures the societal system of cleanness is usually at war with itself:

*Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of the mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order. So it started from a state of non-differentiation; all through the process of differentiating its role was to threaten the distinctions made; finally, it returns to its true indiscriminable character. Formlessness is therefore an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay. (Douglas 1966: 61)*

Even though *Washing Up* more than earlier performances bears evident reference to a collectively lived past, I am not inclined to believe that those grand narratives of history, be they Communist or nationalist, are here domesticated through women's laundering in dirty water in order to be "repaired"—forgiven and forgotten.

In her *Women at Work*, Maja Bajevic does not deal, I think, with that collective time institutionalized as *History*, but with the time of memory, instead. This is individualized time, a time that is made *personal*. If we

presume that during the shared "feminine" labor an interplay of personal and shared memories also takes place, each of the performances becomes, in effect, a *Trauerarbeit*, a work of mourning. This process, though, implies that the "wounds" and "absent spaces" (or absent lives) are remembered in an imperfect manner, as Kaja Silverman suggests:

*The function of recollection ... is to transform, not to reproduce ... To remember perfectly would be forever to inhabit the same cultural order. However, to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present. (Silverman 1996: 189)*

The matrix of memory weaves on behalf of the *here and now*.

### Acknowledgment

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### Notes

1. Before the war, Srebrenica had only about eight thousand inhabitants, mainly Muslim. The town subsequently became the shelter for some forty thousand people who fled the ethnical cleansing

carried out by the Serb armies, whether troops of Republika Srpska (Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, self-proclaimed in March 1992) headed by General Ratko Mladic or the (para)military groups orchestrated from Belgrade. During the Serb offensive on 11 and 12 July 1995, it is estimated that some seven or eight thousand Muslim male citizens, mainly civilians, were executed and laid in mass graves. (The website "Women of Srebrenica" provides a number of even ten thousand victims). Older citizens, women and children were abducted from their homes in Republika Srpska and lead an exiled life since.

2. Some five years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, some twenty thousand Bosnian citizens were still unaccounted for. One year after the end of armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, approximately one hundred and ninety mass graves had been located, of which sixteen contained more than five hundred bodies.
3. Srebrenica, a town in Eastern Bosnia some 15 km from the border between Serbia (FR Yugoslavia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina, was designated in April 1993 as one of the six "safe areas" protected by the UN forces. Western governments, however, contributed no more than seven thousand of the estimated thirty-four thousand troops needed. At the time of the Serbian offensive in July 1995, the town was "observed" by the Dutch UN Peace Corps. Subsequent Western estimation

of the event was described: "The fall of Srebrenica was the darkest moment in international involvement in Bosnia. UNPROFOR did nothing to stop murder of perhaps as many as 8,000 Muslim men" (Silber and Little 1996: 345). In 1996, General Mladic, indicted as responsible for the mass killing in Srebrenica, and the leader of Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic, were charged with genocide and crimes against humanity in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. At the time of writing, they are still at large.

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